

# AN OPEN LETTER TO PRESIDENT JOHNSON *on Vietnam...*

Each day we hear fresh news from Vietnam, news both strange and grim. We strike by air in reprisal against *North Vietnam* because our soldiers, sent as armed technicians and advisers to an army which cannot yet guard them well, have been attacked in their barracks in the very heart of *South Vietnam*. We have widened the war—how wide will it become?

Fear of escalation of this undeclared war against North Vietnam mounts with each sudden report of renewed violence. Unless the situation is very different from what it appears to be, we have lost the political initiative in Vietnam and are attempting to substitute military actions for political ones. We face grave risks in Vietnam. Americans have faced even graver risks for good and high cause, Mr. President, but we must first *understand* why we must take such risks. What are our goals in Vietnam? Are they just? Can they be accomplished? Are they truly worth what they are bound to cost in dollars and human lives?

With whom are we allied in Vietnam? Are our soldiers fighting side-by-side with troops of a representative and legitimate national government, or are we embroiled in defense of an unpopular minority in a fierce and costly civil war? Our representatives assure us that we and the Saigon government have the overwhelming support of the Vietnamese people. How can this be so? On the same day that Mr. McNamara said sneak attacks upon our soldiers cannot be prevented, an American officer on the scene in Vietnam declared that "any of the people in the hamlet over there could have warned us that the Vietcong were around, *but they did not warn us*". The weapons used against us are most often American weapons, captured from or surrendered by the South Vietnamese army. Mr. President, we submit that weak field intelligence in South Vietnam and a steady loss of workable weapons to the enemy, are deep symptoms of an unpopular cause.

Why are we fighting in Vietnam? Mr. President, we think we understand why we went into Vietnam after the French withdrew. It was because this nation hoped to encourage the development of a popular, stable, and democratic government which would help to lead all Southeast Asia toward lasting peace. Historical, political, social, religious and sectional factors have prevented this development. The original assumptions are no longer valid. We have become increasingly unwelcome everywhere in

Southeast Asia. Our presence seems to deepen, rather than to relieve, the bitterness and hostility of the people. It was only 10 years ago that the Vietnamese defeated a French army of nearly half a million men. Will the same battles occur again?

Can we win in Vietnam? Mr. President, we know that our nation has sufficient fire power to destroy the entire world. We also know that you do not wish to call upon this awesome power. How can we possibly win and yet prevent a widening of this conflict? How can we win in Vietnam with less than 30,000 "advisers" when the French could not win with an army of nearly half a million fighting both North and South of the present dividing frontier?

Is it worth the cost? The French defeat in Indo-China cost them 172,000 casualties. Yet, before their final bloody defeat at Dienbienphu, the French generals and diplomats spoke with the same toughness and optimism, the same assurances we now hear from our leaders.

The French had overwhelming numbers and fire power but they lost in Vietnam because they lacked the support of the population. Do we face the same prospect, or are there facts which the public does not know which show our situation to be clearly different?

Mr. President, we are aware that you have secret information which cannot be shared with us. But could such information completely refute the picture of events and the political insights provided to us by serious newspapermen who have been in the area for years?

All we can see is a seemingly endless series of demonstrations and riots in Saigon and Hue, of military coups, of threats and challenges to the dignity of our Ambassador and our other representatives by the very men we seek to sustain in power.

We have lost the initiative in Vietnam. A few guerrillas can trigger American reactions that widen the war. The events of the past weeks are leading step by step along the path to war with China.

Would it not be both prudent and just to take the initiative towards peace in Vietnam? If we are not to widen the war beyond all conscience, as reasonable men we must initiate negotiations while there is still time.

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